



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE COMMISSION PLAN OF CITY GOVERNMENT¹

OSWALD RYAN

Harvard University

To appreciate the real significance in municipal affairs of the lately inaugurated movement toward city government by commission some knowledge of the general trend of American municipal development is necessary; for it is as a phase of a general tendency and not as an isolated experiment that the movement is to be properly regarded. Like most of our institutions, our city government, both in form and substance, was transplanted from England to the colonies, where it underwent the usual differentiation under the influence of changed conditions. This differentiation, however, did not proceed to any marked degree during the colonial period, and at the beginning of the national era the general form of municipal government, with the exception of the New England town-meeting system, was that of the English borough. Then began a new period, during which the influence of the federal and state governments dominated the organic development of the municipalities. That the "federal analogy" should have thus become the controlling factor in this development was due partly to a widespread belief in the efficacy of the governmental principles which it involved, and partly to a misconception of the functions of the municipality. A cardinal feature of the federal plan was Montesquieu's principle of the separation of powers, having for its object to safeguard the interests of the people against the arbitrary and ill-advised acts of public officers. Another characteristic was the bicameral legislature composed of members representing geographical districts. By incorporat-

¹ This essay, here somewhat abridged, received the Baldwin prize, offered annually by the National Municipal League.

ing these principles in the municipal charters which the rapidly growing needs of the urban population brought into existence during the nineteenth century, the state legislatures sowed the seed of municipal inefficiency, which was destined to bear fruit in "the one conspicuous failure of the American people."

The consequence of this senseless diffusion of powers among various boards and officials, which received its widest application during the last half of the nineteenth century, was to render almost impossible the prompt and efficient performance of municipal functions. The principle of "checks and balances," intended as a curb on the arbitrary and ill-advised acts of public officials, became instead an obstacle to the wise and salutary measures of men who had at heart the best interests of the people. Moreover, since the concomitant of the division of power is division of responsibility, it became impossible to fix the blame for inefficiency and corruption, which became ever present factors in city administration. Scarcely less sinister in its results was the principle of the representative legislature. The belief in sectional representation was doubtless based upon the assumption that the different parts of a city possess different interests as different states sometimes possess diverse interests. Experience proved, however, that there was no such division of interests as was supposed, and the municipal council, instead of regarding the general interests of the city, came to represent the special interests of particular wards. A blind adherence to principles which had contributed to the success of a national government, besides opening the way to extravagance, wastefulness and inefficiency, gave demagogic politicians an opportunity to exploit the public interests and thus prepared the way for the spoils system in local government.

The logical result of this growth toward a cumbersome and complex system was the birth, in the closing decades of the last century, of a counter movement toward the centralization of administrative power and responsibility. The important powers which had been gradually taken from the municipal council and distributed among numerous boards and officials were now centered in the mayor, who became the most powerful member of

the government. It is as another form of this tendency toward administrative centralization that the movement for city government by commission finds its proper place in the general municipal movement. As a distinguished municipal student has written: "The system of government by commission must be regarded not as a new experiment successfully conducted by a few scattered cities, but as the climax of a well defined movement, from the influence of which hardly a single city in the country has been entirely exempt."²

Nor is the form of the commission plan to be regarded as absolutely new. It will be remembered that the old New England form of town government by a board of selectmen, which exercised all municipal powers between the town-meetings, is essentially similar to government by commission; and Professor Beale of the Harvard Law School has pointed out that the former Boston government, with its small council and concentrated administration, was constructed on the same plan. To these precedents might be added the Memphis commission which was appointed after the yellow fever epidemic of 1874, and the Washington commission which has managed the affairs of the capital since 1878.

The first city to abandon the old form of government for the commission plan as it is commonly understood to-day, was Galveston. The immediate cause of this radical change was the destructive tidal wave which swept over the city in 1900, destroying a large part of the population and property. The great calamity came as a kind of climax to a long period of wretched experience during which the city government had become so clogged with inefficiency and corruption as to reduce the administration to a deplorable state. At this juncture, when the city was facing bankruptcy, an organization of business men, who represented large property interests, undertook to ameliorate the conditions through an attempt to secure a new government. The idea of government by commission was then suggested and embodied in a new charter. Exactly twelve months after the

² W. B. Munro in the "Providence Conference for Good Government."

flood, as a result of a vigorous campaign in which many of the most prominent citizens joined, the old government was replaced by the commission.

The basic idea of the new government was the centralization of all municipal powers in a board of five members, one of whom was given the title of mayor-president. The charter provided for the appointment of three of the commissioners by the governor, and the election of the remaining two by the people at large. As a result of certain constitutional objections which were upheld by the Texas supreme court, the appointive feature was struck out, and provision made for the election of all five members by the people. The government, under the amended charter, is divided into four departments, each of which is in charge of a commissioner who is held responsible for the management of his department. The general supervision of the affairs of the municipality is vested in the mayor-president, who is the executive head of the city, but exercises no veto power or right to interfere in the affairs of any of the departments; he is a *primus inter pares*, but possesses no more power than any other member of the commission.

That the very striking improvement which followed the establishment of this simple and efficient system should have attracted the attention of other cities which were suffering from the common municipal ills, was natural, and within a few years several other Texas cities had received similar charters from the legislature. Interest in the new plan now spread to the northern states, where several legislatures passed acts permitting cities, through a referendum vote, to adopt the new form of government. The plan has spread so rapidly within the last few years that almost every section of the country furnishes some example of its application.

It must not be thought, however, that the Galveston plan was adopted in its entirety by those cities which obtained commission charters. Indeed the opinion generally prevailed that the Galveston plan was seriously defective in not having sufficient safeguards against the misuse of power by members of the commission, and it soon underwent a modification out of which evolved

a new form, which is frequently called the "Des Moines," or "improved" plan. This modified form, although retaining the general characteristics of the Galveston government, includes certain additional devices for the purpose of affording the people a more complete control over the commission, and of insuring against the influence of partisan politics in municipal affairs. These devices take the form of the initiative, referendum, recall and non-partisan choice of public officials. It should be noted, however, that this brief description is intended to indicate the fundamental features of the modified plan, and not to imply a uniformity of details, which does not exist.

The division of administrative functions in those cities which have adopted the modified form varies in the different charters. As in the Galveston plan, the mayor is always the executive head of the administration, and, except in one instance, has no more power than the other members of the board. He is sometimes placed at the head of a department, but more frequently exerts a general supervisory power over the municipality as a whole, occupying a place somewhat similar in this respect to that of the German burgomaster. The departments of "finance and revenue" and police and fire are uniformly provided for in the various charters, and the remaining functions vary in their nature and distribution in the different cities. The general policy-determining powers, including the power of appointment and removal, are vested in the commission.

The commissioners are regularly elected at large by the qualified voters of the city for a term varying, in most cases, from two to four years. In some instances they are elected to specific departments, but the more common practice is for the commission as a whole to assign its members to the several departments. An interesting question, which may be noted here, has been raised with regard to whether the commissioners should be required to devote all or a part of their time to the work of their office. It has been held by some that a liberal compensation should be provided and the commissioner be required to devote all his time to the work of his office. Others have held that such a provision would discourage from entering the public service men who would

be unwilling to give up their private business, and thus would deprive the municipality of the services of a most competent class of men. The present trend of opinion seems to favor the provision requiring the commissioner to devote his entire time to the work of the city.

The initiative, referendum and recall, which characterize the modified plan, further reflect the desire for more efficient and responsible officials. The Des Moines charter, which, because it has been widely copied, may be regarded as typical in this respect, provides that any proposed ordinance may be submitted to the council on a petition signed by 25 per cent of the voters, and requires the council to pass the ordinance without alteration within twenty days, or, if requested in the petition, to submit it to the people for vote. The voters then have the privilege of enacting the ordinance into law, which may not be altered or repealed by the council until it has again been submitted for popular vote. The charter further provides that any ordinance may be suspended on petition signed by 25 per cent of the voters and presented within ten days after the passage of the ordinance, and makes it obligatory on the council either to repeal or submit the offensive ordinance to a referendum vote. A referendum is required on all franchises. The recall may be brought into use by a petition signed by 25 per cent of the voters; if the petition is found to be sufficient the council is required to call an election in which the offending official may be a candidate. A perplexing question has risen in many cities in connection with the per centum of votes required to bring the recall into operation, and a dissatisfaction is noticeable in more than one city with the per centum which has been fixed. The general opinion seems to be that this provision should vary with the size and character of the population; thus it has been held that the 25 per centum is too small for a city of the size of Haverhill and too large for one of the size of Buffalo.

Enthusiastic supporters of the modified plan of commission government are accustomed to point to these provisions for direct legislation as its most important point of superiority over the Galveston system. Indeed, it must be admitted that the

addition of this machinery to the original plan has had much to do with overcoming the objection that the commission system is undemocratic, and it is probable that it would never have received such wide adoption had it not been so altered as to place the governing body under closer popular control. And yet, though great dependence is placed on the initiative, referendum and recall, the ultimate efficiency of these devices is by no means an established fact. It should not be forgotten that the principle of direct legislation, in the few cases where it has been applied in the United States, has not been an unqualified success. It may easily be seen how the principle, if applied to an extreme degree and by an unintelligent electorate, might prove an unwise interference with the work of the commission. Nor is the cumbersome and expensive nature of the instrument to be disregarded in considering the advisability of its adoption in large cities. Indeed, it may be said with certainty that as long as the city electorates possess no higher sense of civic consciousness and intelligent interest than they have shown in the past, this method of direct legislation will not produce results commensurate with the expectation of its promoters.

Thus far the recall, with one exception, has not been brought into use in commission-governed cities, and it is, therefore, difficult to render judgment on the efficacy of this instrument. Some persons have asserted that it will deprive the commissioners of their independence of action, and make them subservient to the popular clamor. Others have feared that it will put a weapon into the hands of corporations seeking public favors, who will use it to influence the commissioners. All that may be safely said of the recall as a part of the modified system is that its influence at present lies in its potentiality, and not in its actual use.

Another principle which is perhaps no less important than that of direct legislation in the modified commission plan, is embodied in the non-partisan choice of all officials and employees of the government. The methods which have been almost uniformly adopted to accomplish these objects are the non-partisan primary and election and the civil service board. Here we find the charters varying in the extent to which they provide for the elimination

of partisan politics in municipal affairs. The Haverhill government, for example, merely includes the non-partisan ballot and civil service, while the Iowa law, on the other hand, goes further in prohibiting any person or candidate from accepting or giving money to a candidate for office to secure election or appointment; and provides for the punishment of any person who accepts money for services rendered to a candidate.

Most charters provide for a non-partisan preliminary election for the selection of candidates in which any qualified voter who has secured the endorsement of a certain per cent or number of the qualified voters may become a candidate. The candidates chosen in the preliminary election are then voted on in the general election. There are certain modifications of this system, however, which will be briefly noted. The Berkeley charter provides for the nomination of candidates by twenty-five individual certificates instead of a single petition, as in the Iowa law. The same charter also adopts the French system in providing that if any candidate receives in the first election a majority of the votes cast, he is thereby elected, and that, in case he fails to receive a majority, a second election must be called in which a simple plurality is sufficient to elect. The Grand Junction charter contains an interesting innovation in a provision for a preferential system of voting which is intended to give the citizen a wider range of choice and to dispense with the necessity of a second election. The Berkeley method of nomination by individual certificates is also found in this charter.

The civil service board is sometimes provided for in the charter and sometimes in the general laws of the state, in which case there may be a local board in each city or a single state board. The ordinary charter provides for a board of five members who are elected by the commission and have no other official connection with the government.

The principle of the merit system, thus embodied in the ordinary commission charter, is unquestionably essential to the well-being of the administrative service; the provisions prescribing the manner in which this principle shall be applied, however, are open to serious criticism and constitute an important defect in

the commission charter. The charter ordinarily contains a brief statement of the merit principle and leaves it to the commission to supplement this principle by establishing the scope and work of the civil service board. But this scheme is inconsistent with the fundamental principle of the commission plan, the centralization of official responsibility. If the civil service board failed to carry out the principle laid down in the charter the responsibility for this failure plainly would be divided between it and the commission; and this involves a situation which is supposed to find no place in the theory of the commission government. Moreover, the scheme places the civil service board too much in the power of the commission: the charter provides a civil service board as a check on the probable tendency of the commission to use the administrative offices as spoils, and at the same time, by leaving it to the commission to determine the scope of the board's duties, places to a considerable degree in the commission's hands the power which it presumably seeks to check. The effective application of the merit system requires a more complete definition of the powers of the civil service board than the commission charters at present contain.

An impartial investigator, comparing present conditions in commission-governed cities with those existing under the old system, will be impressed with the striking results which have been accomplished under the new plan. Perhaps the most marked change has been in the administration of the city's finances, a department which has without exception responded to the expert efforts of the commissioners. Large floating debts have been extinguished; sinking funds created and the public credit restored; the policy of resorting to bond issues to meet current expenses has been abandoned; the public funds have been let out to financial institutions and have thus afforded a source of considerable income; expenses in all departments have been cut down and the tax rate in some instances has been reduced. In addition to an improved financial condition, investigation shows a decided improvement in the various public services, which invariably have been brought to a higher point of efficiency; purer water, better streets, and a more efficient police and fire service are testified to by visiting delegations and students.

Again, a higher grade of men, in most instances has been attracted into the municipal service. The reasons for this are plain. Aside from the necessity of catering to a political "boss" in order to hope for public office, perhaps nothing has been more influential in driving competent men from the public service than the curtailment of the powers of the council, and the diffusion of those powers among numerous boards and officials, which took place in the last century. The experience of those years proves beyond all doubt that the character of civic office declines according to the power associated with it. As President Eliot has said: "There are always numerous good candidates for office when power, responsibility and other considerations are attached to it." The increased power and importance which the commission charter confers upon the council, and the freedom of the candidate from the tyranny of the boss, have no doubt been responsible for the presence of a better grade of officials in the commission-governed cities. Whether the second of these factors will continue to be operative time only can decide.

It must not be thought, however, that the commission governments have always been in charge of men of extraordinary ability, or that the success of the plan depends upon the presence of experts on the commission. The expert must be present if the commission government is to be a success, but he must be present in the permanent official and not necessarily in the elective commissioner. The commissioner's function is supervisory, not administrative, and the people are always competent to choose a supervisor, although they seldom succeed in choosing expert administrators. It is true that some commissions, like that of Haverhill, Massachusetts, are made up of municipal experts; the majority, however, like that of Galveston, are composed of men of average ability. When it is remembered that the prevailing type of elective official in American cities under a system of manhood suffrage is likely to be the man of average powers, the great importance of this fact in determining the ultimate value of the commission plan becomes apparent.

Another striking improvement has been a general elevation in the moral tone of the cities which have adopted the new plan.

Citizens and investigators generally agree that the advent of the new system has been marked by an elimination of gambling, the policy shop, the disreputable resort and other forms of vice. Perhaps the most striking example of such improvement is found in Galveston, where the lawless elements, for many years previous to the adoption of the commission form, exerted a tremendously demoralizing influence over the administration. A simple program of strict and impartial law enforcement has been responsible for this change.

A consideration of the improvements which have taken place under commission government naturally gives rise to the question: What causes have been responsible for these results? The advocates of the commission plan give the entire credit for the improved conditions to the system itself; its opponents explain the improvement in the light of the increased public interest in city affairs, and assert that the old system would have given the same service if it had been supported by an active public opinion. Although it must be admitted that public opinion is an important factor in the success of a system of government, it is not to be denied that the form of the government is also important, and this fact has always been recognized by the people. A consideration of the merits and defects of the commission plan, therefore, will be helpful in explaining its past success and in judging of its ultimate value.

By far the most conspicuous merit of the plan lies in its centralized character. The whole course of municipal history points to the truth that administrative skill and efficiency, to be effective, must be centralized. An appreciation of this principle explains the marked efficiency of European city governments, just as its violation accounts for the inefficiency of the American governments. Now, as has often been pointed out by its advocates, city government is largely a matter of business management, and, therefore, demands an administrative organization that will be suitable for conducting business operations. The commission plan, with its small council, resembling a board of directors, thus permits the transaction of the city's business with the same promptness and efficiency with which the affairs of a private corporation are man-

aged. Especially will this advantage be apparent in the management of public franchises,—a function which is too often associated with gross inefficiency and corruption. Indeed, it is almost impossible under the old form of government to secure a regard for the ordinary business principles in the granting of franchise and other public privileges. The small commission may reasonably be expected to correct this evil and secure more equitable conditions for the public. Moreover, while the commission charter does not guarantee to eliminate corruption in connection with these grants, it promises to reduce the probability of such corruption to a minimum.

From this centralization of power flows another distinct merit of the commission plan, namely, a centralization of official responsibility. The most impressive lesson which our municipal experience teaches is that honesty and efficiency in government are but idle terms when responsibility is divided, and it is no exaggeration to say that whatever improvement the past few years have witnessed in our cities has involved some recognition of this principle. Now, under the commission plan responsibility is centralized in a few elective officers who have no means of evading it. "The citizen of the commission city," declares the enthusiastic advocate, "knows who is responsible for the impure water, the unclean streets or the negligent police force, and may direct his criticism against the delinquent officer." The consciousness of this ever present public scrutiny, it is asserted, will keep the commissioners responsive to the popular will and eliminate official negligence and incompetency from the administration. This merit is undoubtedly to be commended in the commission system, and yet it must be not overlooked that, to be effective, it must be supported by an enlightened public interest, and that an indifferent electorate will not only fail to make effective this responsibility, but, because of the centralization of power which goes with centralized responsibility, will open the way to more serious consequences than would be possible under the old system of divided power. Concentration of responsibility is not *ipso facto* a guarantee of honest and efficient administration, although it will do much to secure good government when supported by public opinion.

Another commendable quality of the commission plan is its extreme flexibility, which permits the administrative machinery to be adapted to the needs of the individual city. Here again we encounter a weakness of the old government which appeared during the last century; for, strange as it may seem, our city governments have not always possessed the rigidity of character which now characterizes them. The same period that saw the dominating influence of the state and national governments on the municipalities witnessed the gradual assumption by the state legislatures of powers previously exercised by the local governing bodies. Among these usurpations was the power of prescribing the details of the local administrative machinery, which thereafter was exercised by the state, which possessed little, if any, knowledge of local needs. The logical result was the growth of an inflexible administrative organization which, under rapidly changing social and economic conditions, made practically impossible a scientific solution of the city problem. The commission plan, therefore, by intrusting the details of organization to a locally elected body, makes possible a flexible and responsive administrative machinery, which will go far to solve the problem of city government.

In general harmony with these motives of securing a centralized, responsible, and flexible administration, the commission plan seeks to eliminate partisanship from the administrative service. The importance of this virtue in any plan of city government must be apparent to all who have observed the demoralizing influence of partisan politics in city affairs. Several years ago James Bryce wrote that the party system was perhaps an incident rather than a cause of the failure of the American city governments. It can scarcely be doubted now that the influence of party politics has been one of the leading factors in the decline of the cities. Without this baneful influence the cities would hardly have reached such a degraded state as that into which they fell under the party system. It does not follow, however, that because partisan politics should be banished from city administration the party system itself should be abolished. While the struggle between parties founded on state and national issues, and having no relation to city policies, is to be condemned, it is none the less true

that parties divided on local issues are both desirable and necessary, and should be recognized as a legitimate part of local government. It may be noted that the well-governed cities of Europe are all administered by the representatives of parties. These parties, however, divide on local issues and do not treat city offices as political spoil. Those who are directing the development of our city government should not lose sight of this necessary distinction between partisanship and local political parties.

The merits of the commission plan which have been briefly outlined are much more obvious than its defects. This is due to the comparatively short trial which the new system has had, and to the further fact that it has been tested under most favorable conditions, which may easily have prevented latent defects from revealing themselves. Objections have been urged against the system, however, which deserve the serious consideration of all who are sincerely desirous of bettering the condition of the cities. Perhaps the most frequent indictment of the plan is that it is un-American and contrary to the spirit of our institutions. The concentration of all powers in a small body, which advocates of the system regard as one of its most conspicuous merits, is denounced as a tendency toward oligarchy, to be justified only on the ground that the many should be ruled by the few. The objection is difficult to maintain. It has always been recognized in American government that where responsibility is centralized there is no danger of a subversion of democratic institutions. The New England town-meeting system, with its concentration of all important powers in a small board is essentially similar in this respect to the commission plan, and the town-meeting plan has been universally admitted to be the most perfect form of democracy ever devised. Moreover, as Professor Munro has pointed out,³ it has proved time and time again that the single elective officer may in his official actions more faithfully reflect public opinion than a large body of elected representatives. Nor should it be forgotten that the commission plan embodies in the initiative, referendum and recall a more radically democratic principle than is contained in the old system.

³ In the "Providence Conference for Good Government."

In one very important respect, however, the new form may be said to depart from the established traditions of American government, namely, in the fusion of appropriating and expending authorities. The principle has generally been recognized that these two authorities should be kept separate, and with the exception of a few county organizations the national, state and local governments provide for the exercise of the appropriating and expending functions by different bodies; even the New England board of selectmen possessed no powers of appropriation, but could expend only what the town-meeting had appropriated. It is significant that there has been no serious attempt to meet this objection to the commission plan, and indeed it would appear that no satisfactory rebuttal exists. All that can be said is that the means of controlling the commission provided in the new plan will tend to weaken the force of this objection.

Another objection offered to the commission plan is that it will encourage the legislatures to further intervention in local affairs, and thus jeopardize the success of the movement for municipal home rule. It is asserted that legislatures in the past have been extremely opposed to granting extensive powers to small bodies and that the small governing body of the commission will be no exception to this rule. It cannot be denied that a wide sphere of local control is indispensable to the proper solution of the municipal problem; nor will it be doubted that the natural tendency of the legislatures has been to be sparing in its grants of power to small commissions. On the other hand, it may be said that thus far no tendency inimical to home rule has appeared in commission-governed cities, and that in some cases the legislature, instead of withholding powers, has been even more generous than usual in its grants. The force of this objection is further weakened by the fact that the important legislative powers,—the powers which would stand in danger of being withdrawn from the city under the new form,—are not vested in the commission at all in most charters, but in the people at large through the initiative and referendum. Moreover, it may be said that in one respect the commission plan even discourages legislative intervention. One of the outstanding causes of state interference has been the in-

flexible character of the old system, which has made it necessary for the legislature to interfere whenever local conditions required a change in the administrative organization of the city. Now under the commission plan, since the details of the local administrative machinery are entirely under the control of the commission, there is no excuse for state interference in this sphere of local affairs.

Intimately connected with the charge that the commission plan is unfavorable to home rule for cities is the objection that it is based upon a misconception of the nature of municipal functions. A consistent advocate of commission government, it is declared, is forced to take the position that city government is purely a problem of business and that the government should be organized solely with a view to administrative efficiency. Thus, the commission plan, it is asserted, by lodging all powers in a small board of department heads, makes no distinction between legislative and administrative powers. It is probably true that the advocates of the new form are accustomed to lay undue emphasis on the administrative character of the municipality, and frequently lose sight of the fact that after all municipal government is a political problem. And it must be admitted that a small board of five men, the larger part of whose time and energies must necessarily be occupied with administrative problems, would not appear to be the most efficient kind of a legislative body. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that the commission form does recognize a distinction between legislative and administrative powers: all administrative powers are vested in the commission, and the most important legislative powers are exercised by the people at large through the initiative and referendum. The opponents of the new system should also remember, in their attacks on the administrative character of the commission plan, that, while city government is not merely a business problem, there is strong need for the application of business principles in city administration, and that its failure to provide for a more businesslike management of the city's affairs constitutes one of the greatest indictments against the old system.

Finally, the opponents of commission government have charged

that the new form will increase the influence of party organs. It is said that whenever an office has been made more important through the addition to it of more power, party machines have redoubled their efforts to control it, with the result that partisanship in municipal elections has not been diminished. In the light of past experience this objection would seem to merit serious consideration, and yet it must be conceded that thus far commission-governed cities have been successful in ridding the government of machine rule, and that a non-partisan administration has been obtained in practically every instance. It would be rash, however, to assume that political organizations could never find means to get control of public offices under the commission plan; if public sentiment became lax, the commission government would be no more immune against the power of the machine than any other form of government. Moreover, the consequences resulting from such subjection to machine rule would doubtless be much more serious than under the government of distributed powers, on account of the large powers which are vested in the commission. On the other hand, the commission plan, through its provisions for a non-partisan primary and election and the concentration of official responsibility, will make it much easier for an active public opinion to express itself, thus reducing this danger to a minimum.

But while the objection that the commission government would strengthen the influence of party machines in city elections may not appear so formidable in view of the non-partisan character of the election, it nevertheless takes on an increased importance when large cities are considered. For, while the candidate for public office in the small city can get the ear of the electorate without the aid of a highly developed organization, the candidate in the large city finds this practically impossible, so large is the number of voters to be addressed. He is therefore compelled by necessity to resort to the plan of building up an organization to promote his candidacy. But in this kind of work the political specialist backed by the machine will have a tremendous advantage, and thus the machine candidate stands an excellent chance of success. Moreover, the city of large and heterogeneous popu-

lation presents political problems which are not so much in evidence in the small city, and it may be doubted whether the small governing body of the commission plan will afford a genuine representation of the various interests that make up the large city. While the fact that none of the large cities have had experience with the system will not permit any dogmatic statements regarding its efficiency in this sphere, its adoption, nevertheless, by large and cosmopolitan communities would appear to be a precarious experiment at the least, and one to be undertaken only after the most thorough consideration of its probable consequences.

To render final judgment at the present time on the efficiency of the commission plan of city government would be an act of presumption for which no person who understands the difficulty of the municipal problem in the United States would be willing to stand responsible. The reason for this becomes obvious when we remember that no city has had experience with the system extending beyond a single decade. Experience would seem to say that the ultimate success of any municipal system depends upon the character of the men who administer it, which is to say that the whole problem is one of securing competent and public-spirited men in public office. Now, if the commission plan is so constructed as to attract this kind of men into the municipal service, as past experience would seem to indicate, it must be adjudged efficient. The most scientific opinion thus far expressed on the new system is probably that of Professor Albert Bushnell Hart, who declared that "the Texas commissions are thus far distinctly successful, and are likely to last a considerable time, and perhaps will be permanent."⁴

And yet it may be said with certainty that the experience of these commission-governed cities, short and insufficient as it is to warrant a dogmatic conclusion, contains valuable lessons for American cities that are struggling with the municipal problem. The striking results which have been obtained wherever the new form has been established plead eloquently for the simplification

⁴ *Boston Transcript* for April 11, 1908.

of a system which, because of its decentralized and inefficient form, has long since proved itself inadequate for performing municipal functions. Whatever may be the future municipal system in the United States, we may reasonably predict that it will at least contain the fundamental principle of the commission plan, namely, a centralization of administrative power and responsibility.